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ABSTRACT

Historically women have engaged in three types of work: non-wage (work in the household for family use), market work in the home (e.g., home sewing and the selling of home-processed and -cooked foods), and wage work. As the border states industrialized and developed economically, non-wage labor intensified, production at home for the market increased, and larger numbers of women entered the wage labor market. Of the three types of labor, non-wage labor is the most difficult to describe. Studies tend to concentrate on a single ethnic group and to make comments only in passing without much analysis. Studies available on women's production for the market at home are not much better. Nothing is known of how married women working in their homes produced goods and services or how many did so. Wage labor, the most visible and easiest to document, has been described in an increasing number of articles. Emphasizing the American experience, this paper analyzes the status of historical research on women's work in the border states between Mexico and the United States, identifies changes in the three types of work, and examines women's work from the Anglo, Black, Hispanic, and Native American perspectives. (Author/NQA)

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WOMEN'S WORK ALONG THE SOUTHWEST BORDER: A SIGNIFICANT ASPECT OF LABOR HISTORY

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WOMEN'S WORK ALONG THE SOUTHWEST BORDER:
A SIGNIFICANT ASPECT OF LABOR HISTORY

ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes the status of historical research on women's work in the states along the border between Mexico and the United States, emphasizing the American experience. Changes in three types of work are identified—in non-wage, in market work in the home, and in wage work. Women's work is examined from a multicultural perspective: Anglo, Black, Hispanic and Native American. Much remains to be done on all topics, especially non-wage labor.

WOMEN'S WORK ALONG THE SOUTHWEST BORDER:
A SIGNIFICANT ASPECT OF LABOR HISTORY

The following three images are of working women in the Southwest in the 1970's. The first is of an Anglo ranch woman from New Mexico:

The wrinkles are
hand-tooled
in the work leather of her face.
Seventy,
she can pull a calf, brand, ride all day
with
leathered grace.

The second is an Hispanic woman of San Antonio, Texas, selling on the streets:

West Side--corn tortillas for a penny each
Made by an aged woman
and her mother.
Cooked on the homeblack of a flat stove,
Flipped to slap the birth awake
Wrapped by corn hands.
Toasted morning light and dancing history—
earth gives birth to corn gives birth to man
gives birth to earth.
Corn tortillas--penny each.
No tax.

The third is a garment worker recalling her decision to strike at the Farah factory in El Paso:

> "I remember the first time of the walkout we were all in break, eating, having some coffee. And then suddenly there was a whole bunch in the cutting room--the girls and everything. They went over to my table and said, "Alma, you've got to come out with us!" And I just looked at them and said, "Yeah, yeah, I'll go. I'll go." That's all I said, and I had a whole bunch of people sitting there with me and I said, "Let's go." and one of them said, "Well, if you go, we'll go."

Pulling a calf, making and selling tortillas, and working in a garment factory are all important types of women's work that we must look at in any survey of women's work along the southwest border.[1]

By border, I mean those states that touch the surveyor's lines and the shifting Rio Grande River that mark the boundary between Mexico and the United States. Ten states meet along that boundary: California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas to the north and Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, and Tamulipas to the south. Ultimately, a study of women along the border must cross the border to study the states to the south as well as to the north, just as the immigrants and runaway shops have crossed the border. Any study of this area must also be multicultural. In this work I will be looking primarily at women in the northern states in an effort to analyze just how far we have come in achieving that multicultural history of women's work along the border.

The women described above each engaged in an important type of work: non-wage, market work in the home, or wage work. I have used these three classifications and the changes in these types of work over time as the framework for this analysis. The main changes that occurred in women's work as the border states industrialized and developed economically can be identified briefly. Non-wage labor--women's work in the household for the use of the family--intensified. Production at home for the market increased in work like home sewing and the selling of home processed and cooked foods. The wage labor market saw the entry of women in larger numbers: first Black women and unmarried Hispanic and Anglo women, then large numbers of married as well as single Hispanic and Anglo women. Women are now clustered in occupational ghettos reserved for them in a segmented and sometimes segregated labor force.[2]

Of the three types of labor, non-wage remains the most difficult to describe. Family and household labor is the most slippery to quantify and literary information is difficult to handle in a systematic way.

Studies tend to concentrate on a single ethnic group and to make comments only in passing without much analysis. Many studies contain only one or two references to this work. What is needed is an examination of economic conditions, the occupations of husbands and other family members, and settlement patterns. Social geographers can do much to elaborate on how settlement patterns--rural, small town, and urban--affect women's work. Company towns would seem to be especially in need of study. Literally hundreds sprang up in the border states--north and south of the border in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We know little about these communities in which many of the women were non-wage workers simply because so little paid work was available for them. So far we have only literary descriptions. Agnes Smedley's mining towns in Daughter of Earth or Michael Wilson's Zinc Town in "Salt of the Earth" give us an idea of what women's work in mining towns was like. In these versions it was harsh, time consuming, defeating labor. We need to know what it was elsewhere.[3]

There are only fragmentary accounts of the women who worked on family farms and ranches although agriculture and ranching were major occupations for many families along the border. The twentieth century homesteading movement, the struggle of Hispanic families to maintain their lands, and the rural reform movement under the New Deal all touched rural border women deeply. Their stories have yet to be told through oral histories and through careful analysis of remaining documents. Anglo and Hispanic women particularly remember working on farms and ranches, in the fields, tending animals, processing food, as well as other types of work around the house.[4]

For urban areas we have little more to go on. Los Angeles, San Diego, Tucson, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Santa Fe, El Paso, San Antonio,

Dallas, Houston, and south of the border Juarez, Chihuahua, Nuevo Laredo, and Monterey were all important centers for which we know little about women's work. There are few easy answers about non-wage labor to the north--except perhaps that Anglo women most often eased their work by paying wages to Hispanic and Black women to assist them at home. How economic and technological changes affected their work has yet to be explained. How reproduction, child care, housework, food processing, or other physical and psychic services were performed within the home are tasks that the historians of women's labor have identified as important but not yet described in detail.[5]

The studies available on women's production for the market at home are not much better. No one has yet told us exactly how Navajo women managed to produce and market the thousands of rugs they manufactured in the home for the market. Nor, for that matter, how the Hopi women managed their pottery production. We have many rug/pot studies but nothing integrates this work into the economic structure and development of Native American communities and discusses changes in women's work. We do not know about the boarders women took in, or the laundry, or the sewing, or the tortillas sold on the streets of San Antonio. We simply do not know how married women working in their southwestern homes produced goods and services or how many did so, although it is possible that as many as 30 percent of married women may have performed some type of this work during the early decades of the twentieth century. We cannot understand the survival tactics of the working--class family until we know more about this work.[6]

Without better knowledge of these two types of work, the third type--wage labor--will exist in a vacuum. Wage labor, the most visible and easiest to document, as well as the type of labor that has allowed women

to participate in unions and the labor movement, has been described in an increasing number of articles. Yet when one examines what we know about any one industry, the garment industry for example, it is pitifully little. By 1903, Hispanic and Anglo women were already at work in a small overall factory in El Paso. How many other small factories sprang up before the great era of runaway shops in the 1920s when large garment companies began to move south and west is unknown. By the 1920s and 1930s, however, the needle trades were well established in Los Angeles, El Paso, San Antonio, Dallas, Laredo, and Houston. As companies fled to the Southwest to escape unionization, they found union organizers not far behind. During the 1930s, the ILGWU organized women throughout the Southwest in an effort to halt the flow of work out of the east.[7]

They had minimal success. Not because the women were unorganizable. Indeed, the women, who were predominantly Hispanic, were often more militant than Anglo union leaders. But eastern union men never committed the money to make these organizing drives successful in the long run nor did they trust local Hispanic female leadership. The ILGWU maintained segregated Black locals as well. Still, as one historian has emphasized, garment workers were "union-minded" and they saw the unions as instruments for achieving a bit more than minimum wage, paid vacations, medical benefits, and some job stability.[8]

After the 1930s, when the eastern ILGWU lost interest in Texas workers, and Texas passed its right-to-work law, it became more difficult for women to organize locals. While California had no right-to-work law, the result was rather similar. Sweat shops increased in Los Angeles, often employing undocumented workers from Mexico or recent Asian immigrants. Clothing workers remained among the most exploited in the Southwest--whether the workers were Hispanic, Anglo, Black, Asian, or

Native American. In recent years competition from shops that have moved to Asia or Latin America has resulted in the shutting down of factories in the Southwest, and the loss of employment among those workers who have been best paid. Attempts to organize seem to have had the same result. During the Farah strike, a long but ultimately successful strike occurring in one El Paso garment factory, the owners closed a Las Cruces shop in New Mexico. Threats to organize factories have resulted in other southwest plants being closed or workers being told that they would be closed. Recently, a glove factory in Las Cruces closed, even though women workers there were apparently well satisfied, because of competition of imported work gloves from China. Women seldom are allowed to compete with men for jobs but they are often in competition with women on the labor frontiers of Asia and Latin America. The alternative seems to be a return to work in the home for the market--a phenomenon already noted in the New York garment industry.[9]

Perhaps one of the most important developments in the garment industry is the growing militance of women on the southern side of the border. In Juarez in September, 1980, 1000 women workers occupied the American Hospital Supply Corporation factory where they were manufacturing disposable hospital garments for a company based in Evanston, Illinois. Demanding better working conditions, paid vacations, and recognition of the union of their choice, the women supported the Confederacion Revolucionaria de Trabajadores when their old union refused to protest a company decision to increase production quotas and cut incentive pay. Here women have intruded into a situation carefully controlled by the government to attract American-owned plants to Juarez by keeping wages low. The women were aware that American workers produced less and made more money. The global economy of

multinationals was challenged by these women who saw themselves as part of an international labor supply.[10]

Few of the militant organizing drives of the past affected service industries, in which most southwestern women have worked. Unlike the garment industry, service work may not be exported, but recent immigration laws have favored entrance of women who could do domestic work, and agencies both public and private have channeled rural women into this type of urban work. The oversupply of women skilled at service work has, in turn, affected other types of women's work. The ethnic differences here are impressive. In Texas, for example, in 1970 over 58 percent of Black women were in service work, compared to almost 30 percent of Hispanic but less than 16 percent of Anglo workers. The fact that we know so little about the context of service work makes this work invisible despite the high numbers of women involved in it. Ida Gutierrez described the work this way: "I'll tell you, this housework, it's the hardest of them all. It's not a regular job, you know. You work only one day with each people. It's not like when you're working one job. If you don't work, you don't get paid. You don't get vacations or sick leave. They pay you two dollars, one seventy-five, or two thirty an hour. Some of the ladies pay Social Security, but some of them don't... I've worked for rich ladies who thought'd they'd go broke if they gave me a Coca-Cola." For years, government schools prepared Native American women for service jobs like this in the Anglo community. Women have started to organize in this occupation and a recent play, Latina, has dramatized the lives of women who work in other women's houses for wages. Historians have yet to explain the economics of this major occupation of women in the southwestern states.[11]

Paid agricultural work, although much less important in the present than in the past for all women, is also still almost invisible in history. Outside of a few oral histories, some literature, and a few statistics, the story of women as agricultural workers remains to be told. We have no good studies of the work of women in the United Farm Workers in California or Texas. Only recently have historians begun to look more carefully at shed and cannery work.[12] Much material is available but it is seldom systematically studied and women are seldom interviewed to record their experiences.

The closer we move to the present, the more we find women not as factory, service, or agricultural workers, but as part of the great female white and pink collar ghetto that encompasses all sales, clerical, teaching, and nursing occupations. Again, the 1970 Texas statistics are symbolic: 26 percent of Black women are working in white-collar jobs, over 46 percent of Hispanic, but over 73 percent of Anglos. Traditionally, these have been the best paying jobs, with the most status, and the most freedom; but as women have crowded into them, they have become, in turn, occupations that have trapped women in a segmented labor force where women do these jobs and men do other, better paying jobs.[13]

As yet only the bare outlines of what may some day become a history of women's labor along the southwest border have emerged. The research on women's work in other parts of the country clearly points to the importance of this history. All too often, however, labor history is still conceived of as male history.[14] Studies which integrate women's labor history into mainstream male labor history are simply non-existent. The work has begun but it has not yet received the support or resources it needs.

Moreover, few scholars have asked working women what type of research would be most helpful for them.[15] What kinds of work could be undertaken to help women workers is still a question seldom asked. Working women have a right to make up their own agenda. But historians of women's labor and working women have yet to find a place where they may, together, work out priorities for future labor studies.

NOTES:

1. In this article I have referred mainly to material available since the publication of Joan M. Jensen and Darlis Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," Pacific Historical Review, XLIX (1980), 173-213. The reader will there find a general discussion of women's work and many references. Janice Monk, "Policy-Related Research on Women in the Southwest," SIROW Working Paper No. 3, 1981, has listed much of the current research that relates to women's work. The quotations are from Joan M. Jensen, With These Hands: Women Working on the Land, (Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1981); Nancy Hoffman and Florence Howe, Women Working: An Anthology of Stories and Poems, (Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1979); and Laurie Coyle, Gail Hershatter, and Emily Honig, "Women at Farah: An Unfinished Story," in Magdalena Mora and Adelaida R. Del Castillo, eds., Mexican Women in the United States, (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center Publications, University of California, Occasional Paper No. 2, 1980), 117-144.

2. For example, the following occupational statistics from Texas for 1970 show the ethnic differences.

	Service	Blue Collar	White Collar	Farm
Black Women	58.2	15.1	26.0	0.7
Hispanic	29.6	22.0	46.4	2.0
Anglo	15.9	10.4	73.1	0.7

From Carmen Avila, "Women's Work Today," in Women in the Texas Work Force: Yesterday and Today, edited by Richard Croxdale and Melissa Hield (Austin: People's History in Texas, 1979), 51. I have revised the table format to emphasize these differences.

3. Agnes Smedley, Daughter of Earth, (Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1973); Michael Wilson (screenplay)/Deborah Silverton Rosenfelt (commentary), Salt of the Earth, (Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1978).

4. Joan M. Jensen, "New Mexico Farm Women, 1900-1940," in Labor in New Mexico, edited by Robert Kern (in press). Nan Elsasser, Kyle MacKenzie, and Yvonne Tixier y Vigil, Las Mujeres: Conversations from a Hispanic Community, (Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1980), also has numerous references to hoeing and work on farms in the early twentieth century. Sherry Thomas, We Didn't Have Much, But We Sure Had Plenty: Stories of Rural Women, (Garden City: Anchor, 1981), 33-48, 75-91, includes New Mexico farm and ranch women.

5. Rosaura Sanchez, "The Chicana Labor Force," in Rosaura Sanchez and Rosa Martinez Cruz, eds., Essays on la Mujer, (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Center, University of California, 1977), confirms that 92% of all Chicanas are now engaged in non-agricultural labor but few

studies focus on their urban work experiences. Julia Kirk Blackwelder, "Women in the Work Force: Atlanta, New Orleans, and San Antonio, 1930 to 1940," Journal of Urban History, 4 (May, 1978), 331-358, concentrates on wage work while the study by Alfredo Mirande and Evangelina Enriquez, La Chicana: The Mexican-American Woman, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 96-117, 118-141, separates work done in the family and that done outside the family completely. Mario T. Garcia, "The Chicana in American History: The Mexican Women of El Paso, 1880-1920--A Case Study," Pacific Historical Review, XLIL (1980), 315-338, is one of the few attempts to discuss their work as a totality in one city.

6. Joan M. Jensen, "Cloth, Butter and Boarders: Women's Household Production for the Market," Review of Radical Political Economics, 12 (Summer 1980), 14-24, discusses this type of labor. Midwives would fall into this category also. See Fran Leeper Buss, La Partera: Story of a Midwife (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980).

7. Victor B. Nelson Cisneros, "La Clase Trabajadora en Tejas, 1920-40," Aztlan, (1975).

8. Dian Dignan, "Garment Workers in Los Angeles, 1919-1930," in Joan M. Jensen and Sue Davidson, eds., A Needle, A Bobbin, A Strike: Women Needle Workers in America, "forthcoming); Melissa Hield, "Union-Minded: Women in the Texas ILGWU, 1933-50," Women in the Texas Workforce: Yesterday and Today, 1-23.

9. Peggy Li, Buck Wong, and Fong Kwan, "Garment Industry in Los Angeles Chinatown, 1973-74," (Mimeographed, copy in possession of author); Mario F. Vazquez, "The Election Day Immigration Raid at Lilli Diamond Originals and the Response of the ILGWU," and Lisa Schlein, "Los Angeles Garment District Sews a Cloak of Shame," in Mexican Women in the United States, 145-148, 113-116. Hardy Green and Elizabeth Weiner, "Bringing it All Back Home," In These Times, (March 11-18, 1981) describes the return of home sewing.

10. Barbara Ehrenreich and Annette Fuentes, "Life on the Global Assembly Line," Ms. Magazine, IX (January, 1981), 53-59, 71.

11. Milcha Scott with Jeremy Blahnik, "An Excerpt from Latina," Frontiers, V (Summer 1980), 25-30; Lawrence B. DeGraaf, "Race, Sex and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850-1920," Pacific Historical Review, XVIX (1980), 285-314; Avila, "Women's Work Today," 49-54. Quote is from Elsasser, MacKenzie, and Tixier y Vigil, 71.

12. Rosalinda M. Gonzalez, "Chicanas in Southwest Labor and Labor Struggles," in Joan M. Jensen and Lois Scharf, eds., Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement 1920-1940, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, in press) and Richard Croxdale, "The 1938 San Antonio Pecan Shellers' Strike," in Women in the Texas Work Force, 35-48. For an example of the inadequacy of some work being done see California Commission on the Status of Women, Campesinas: Women Farm Workers in the California Agricultural Labor Force, (Sacramento, 1978).

13. Avila, "Women's Work Today," 51.

14. David Brody, Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the 20th Century Struggle, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) and David Montgomery, Workers' Control in America, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), are two recent examples of the lack of integration. Both have only male workers on the cover and inside the book.

15. Rayna Green, "Native American Women," Signs, 6 (1980), 248-267, makes this point in regard to Native American women.